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I B S E N

A LECTURE

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BY

SIR EDWARD RUSSELL

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IBSEN.

If the contributions of human spirits to each other's enlightenment and delight are to fructify to the utmost, it is much more important for critics to recognise the merits than to signalise the defects of great authors. And when a high place has been conquered in letters or art there are few critics who are entitled to pronounce positively against the work by which such a position has been attained. You would not suppose this from much that you read. Nothing is easier than to dispose of the claims of a new great man. Shakspeare, Beethoven, Garrick, Darwin, Wagner, and many others have with great facility been shown to be worthy of extinction; but somehow they have not gone out. Ibsen will not go out either.

In what I shall try to say about him I shall seek to appreciate rather than to depreciate. It is a significant benevolence of language that

“appreciate” in its transitive sense means to appraise with some degree of gusto. I shall hope to assist you in admiring Ibsen, without exaggerating what is good and great in his work—without even ignoring his defects or faults. Whatever else Ibsen is he certainly is not perfect.

But by what standard are we to judge him? He is a playwright. All his plays—even the unlikeliest—have been acted. Yet among us several must be considered unactable, and none are truly popular. As a beginning we must recognise that British taste, or even British classification of plays unsuitable for representation, is not of absolute authority. For this man has caught the ear of Europe—has created moot points of discussion which are likely enough to endure for generations—has completely revolutionised in important respects the tone and the license of our own most serious and most successful plays—has so profoundly affected the conscience of Society that many persons consider him a prophet rather than a dramaturge. Some will say that this is conclusive against him

as a producer of art; but it is nothing against him as a great phenomenon.

When the Senate of University College did me the honour to ask me to lecture here, they suggested that I should choose some subject of dramatic literature. So kindly a recognition of of my own studies came to me in the light of a command, and I at once conceived a desire to furnish an estimate of a writer for the stage of our own time, who, though he is not perhaps ill understood in the general character of his work, cannot be said to have been rightly measured or placed by the English public.

Ibsen has against him almost the whole theatrical profession. A few enthusiasts such as Miss Robins, Miss Marion Lea, Mr. Waring, Miss Achurch, Mr. Charrington have yielded absolutely to his peculiar charm. On the other hand, Mr. Louis Calvert, I see to-day, "has no enthusiasm for Ibsen," who in his opinion "tends to diminish the public stock of harmless pleasure." I can only say that was not the effect upon me when I saw Mr. Calvert's performance of Rosmersholm. But, as a rule, actors detest

what they consider morbid. Their demand is for what they call happy, healthy, wholesome work. They always adored Dickens; they loathed to see Thackeray come into a theatre. Histrionic exactions, if they could be gratified, would have a constant supply of thoroughly pleasant, while at the same time thoroughly able, ingenious and original plays. Anything morbid actors would far rather have treated in the way of comedy than seriously. Ibsen's comedy has very little fun in it. It is saturnine. His serious work is immensely serious. It plunges with little notice into terrible psychological and physiological realities.

To go about to decide how far a great man is a product of his time, or how far a time is the product of its great men, is rather idle occupation. But it can hardly be thought unnatural that in a period such as ours the simpler themes should seem to be exhausted, should fail to stimulate invention; or that more complex and twisted circumstances of life should invite genius to exploit them. Such ideas as evolution and heredity, greater intellectual and

even physical sanctity in human relationships, more binding and, so to speak, impersonal personal obligations to public spirit and public duty, cannot come into vogue among cultured mankind without giving the observant much to observe and the imaginative much to imagine. Even beyond these conceptions, which may be said to cover the newest requirements of individual and municipal life, there may come into view, ushered in by fancy, strange and high-flying ideals. It is a peculiarity of some forms of genius to become fatigued by the commonplace—to find even the newest lights on common duty dull and wearying; and this very fatigue yields to such genius springs of venturesome speculation in regions yet untrodden by human experience. If this is possible at any time, and probable in such a time as ours, it cannot be held abnormal that a great diagnoser of modern moral disease, a great seer of the tendencies of mankind in a world so considerably changed in aspect by modern ideas, should produce works of imagination which those who attach special conventional meanings to the words should not

consider "happy, healthy and wholesome." Such works may, however, be wholesome though the characters in them may not be whole. They may promote happiness and health, though they do not represent happiness and health. The story of the Prodigal Son is not a pleasant one till the last scene, and even then there is a jarring note in the elder brother. There is a word in it so coarse that it would scarcely now be permitted in a leading article. I should receive a number of letters telling me that newspapers must lie about and that Miss Podsnap might see them. But the story of the Prodigal is salutary. It has warned many a lad against profligacy; it has drawn many a profligate back to purity. We may not expect the serenity of such a gospel parable in the creations of a dramatist who as yet is not persuaded that the good in the world has much chance of conquering the evil: but the sternness of this moralist may be necessary to make us understand new and old disorders, and by contrast he illustrates in several of his characters a nobility and a poetry of goodness which have been raised to

the highest power by communion with the subtle spirit of this age.

We may say all this and more, and yet not have begun to criticise Ibsen as a playwright. Indeed, the question of standard is apt to be embarrassing. One person says, "What does it teach?" Another says, "If it purposely teaches anything it is all wrong in art." One cries, "What is his message?" Another cries, "If he has any message at all he is no dramatist." Now Ibsen always has a message, though different people may read it differently; and he is always a dramatist though often crude and provincial and juvenile in his methods. The best thing we can do in such cases is to eschew canons and recognise facts. Ibsen's art is chiefly power. His secret is chiefly grip. He is the more notable, therefore, as an effective dramatist, because he is independent of the construction, the probability, the polish, the dialogue of playwrights more expert in the niceties of their craft. The experience of most people is that they begin to read or see a play of Ibsen with curiosity; that they presently smile

at its puerilities; that they expect to be bored by his *dramatis personæ*; that as they advance they wonder how so provincial a man could ever get so European a reputation; but that suddenly, just as they are going to yawn, they are as it were struck to the very centre by some strong, penetrating, pregnant suggestion of character or problem which seems to curdle the sensibilities. From that moment the author has them at his mercy. His grip never relaxes until his design is worked out. His faults and awkwardnesses matter not. The reader or spectator submits to the Ibsen spell.

I am often asked if the plays act well. So far as I know, surprisingly well. I have seen only three—"A Doll's House," "Hedda Gabler," and "Rosmersholm." I had read each of them before seeing them—"a thing I do not hold with," as Arthur Sketchley's Mrs. Brown used to say. Yet I found the action freshly and unexpectedly engrossing; the dialogue astonishingly piquant considering that it was essentially colloquial and ordinary; and, as far as I could judge, the sudden passages where the grip comes must

have been as startling and remorseless in their seizure of the auditor as I had found them in reading, and now found them again upon the stage. I long to see "Ghosts," and the "Wild Duck," and "the Master Builder," as crucial examples of Ibsen's peculiar power of surmounting, perhaps mounting by, his own deficiencies, which is, taken along with all the circumstances, the most curious phenomenon of dramaturgy which has come under my observation.

He never minds the laugh being against himself. In this he stands absolutely alone among dramatists. The first thing a playwright learns after he gets his start is to *be* a playwright—that is, to be a craftsman whom no one will make ashamed. He winces as he writes at the thought of any of his characters saying or doing anything which will provoke the stage manager, or the actors, or a sniffing critic, or a shrewd man in the pit or gallery to ridicule or sneer, or the lifting of the eyebrows of contempt. There is indeed one popular and powerful dramatist of our own stage who has a little of the awkward youth which we perceive per-

petually in Ibsen, and which Ibsen will never grow out of. I mean Mr. Henry Arthur Jones ; and in this respect the best of his play-writing is a remarkable contrast to the always adult work of Mr. Pinero. But if Mr. Jones is young, Ibsen is infantile. Yet Ibsen's aims and ideas are more searching and far-reaching than those of either of these authors, and but for Ibsen the most striking of their dramas would never have been conceived.

Let me lead you up—or down—to one instance of this strange and unexampled flaw, which must be considered to belong to his genius, because inseparable from it and characteristic of the man, though seemingly the reverse of contributory to anything great and valuable which his genius produces. The story of Hedda Gabler is a peculiar one even for Ibsen. She is the newly-married wife, aged twenty-nine, of a zealous, ambitious, good-natured professor, who thinks himself most fortunate in having won her, but expects nothing particular to happen ; is as towards women and the feminine nature quite shallow and casual and honest ; fresh and

pleasant and interesting within his limits ; the very man to be easily happy with a healthy, agreeable, and ordinarily intelligent wife ; not at all likely to be very much occupied by her, or to notice anything peculiar in her, unless it is forced upon him. He assumes that she *will* be healthy, agreeable, intelligent, and hospitable, and keeps his eyes alertly on his professional work, even during their honeymoon. In this particular case the play begins, not ill and clumsily, but well, and with great art. The arrival of the young couple at their home, the characters of the professor's aunt and old servant, the non-accommodation of the wife to her new surroundings, and the fussy content of the husband, who is wholly without misgivings, are sketched with vivid skill. As a matter of fact, the good homely young man of letters might as well have brought Cleopatra home. Hedda, dignified and distinguished, of pallid beauty, with steel-grey eyes having a cold open expression of serenity, the hair an agreeable brown of medium tint, but not very thick—for Ibsen never leaves you in doubt on points of per-

sonality—is an incarnation of reckless selfish ambition, and of an insatiable appetite for a fascinating mastery over a certain type of men. To this type her husband does not belong. She has married “because she had danced till she was tired,” and because she counts on show and position. In the ordinary sense she is not a woman of passion. Ibsen’s women seldom are in that signification passionate; and indeed most of his men take their love rather quietly, and are either common-place (as Tesman) or exhausted volcanoes (as Judge Brack and Dr. Rank), or beings whom it is difficult to ignite except with very peculiar fire (as Rosmersholm). If one may judge from Ibsen, drink, literature, wastrelism, and eccentric ideals have a great deal more to do with masculine adventures in Scandinavia than have the desires and fancies which, in the rest of Europe, produce most of the life-dramas; while ideals, pure and simple, are the motive power of dramatic conduct among good and bad Norse women alike. There is usually in Ibsen’s plays some symbol—such as the home and social life which Tesman and

Hedda have dreamed of—to typify, by allusions to it under various aspects of the action, the moral situation ; and there is often a ne’er-do-well—usually a man of real ability gone wrong—to preach or point a moral. In “Hedda Gabler” the ne’er-do-well has begun to do well again, but a fine situation is created by his being a competitor with Hedda’s husband for fame and place, being also a lover of hers in former days, and now in comradeship with another woman who worships and is saving him by keeping him off drink. It is Hedda’s aim to have courage “to live her life”—caring not at all that her life should be good, and true, and humane. By her mastery over Lövborg, the weak though brilliant rival of her husband in literature, she pushes him back into alcohol and disgrace, and by contrivance obtains the manuscript of the book which is to crown his fame, and burns it before the audience in a stove. The drama is thus advancing to a truly remarkable *dénouement*. Hedda Tesman, finding that after all her whimsical villainy is not prospering quite according to her peculiar mind, resolves to shoot

herself behind a curtain. This is not in any way announced beforehand, though she has toyed with pistols, but, Lövborg having shot himself, she praises him for "having had the courage to do what had to be done." She regards this as an act of voluntary courage, which she is glad to find still possible in the world—"something over which there falls a veil of unintentional beauty." "Force and will enough to break away from the banquet of life—so early" is, in her judgment, admirable and enviable. Her ideal fails her afterwards because the man has shot himself in a scene of ill-resort, and in the abdomen instead of in the breast. "Oh, what a curse of ridicule and vulgarity hangs over everything if only she touches it!" The crisis arrives when it becomes known to her that it was with her pistol, suggestively lent to him by her, that Lövborg shot himself, and that Judge Brack, who has been forcing an intimate friendship on her, holds this fact *in terrorem* over her. Then after various touches of keen comedy aimed at each of the personages in the domestic scene, she passes behind a cur-

tain, and even in the act of lightly conversing with the others, "lives her life," as she would say, by ending it. The fatal shot is heard; her innocent husband exclaims, after his manner, that she is playing with her father's pistols again; the catastrophe is discovered; Hedda lies dead; the *roué* judge, who has been carrying on a sort of toy-temptation with her, sinks half fainting in a chair. "May God take pity on us," he cries. "People don't do such things."

Whether they "do such things" or not, the picture presented throughout this most dramatic play of a home perverted from its happiness and innocence by wild vagaries of diseased individualism is most powerfully conceived and is of intensely true moral application in many ways, as might easily be shown were citation possible. I know of nothing stronger or truer in its essentials to life. But with a careless indifference to the right choice of expedients, which, if Ibsen were not an old and practised hand we should have to call juvenile awkwardness, the great shock which ends the play is preceded by the wholly unnecessary absurdity

of Hedda's husband and Lövborg's lady-comrade sitting down suddenly with the notes of Lövborg's destroyed work and beginning then and there before the audience to reproduce it. This seems absurd in the telling; it is absolutely ludicrous in the acting; and might quite easily have been avoided. Excellent and poignant effects are made by Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted being engaged together in reference to the book. They might even be glancing at and sampling the materials which Mrs. Elvsted has preserved. But to actually go to work at a moment's notice upon a literary task which is to last them months is to risk by a needless absurdity the whole force of the climax of the play.

Ibsen's work abounds in such absurdities and lends itself to burlesque. One only has to pass into a Philistine mood, and, without being much of a wit, one may extract from these plays plenty of rough amusement. Admirers of Ibsen should take quite kindly all parodies and caricatures of the Master. Mr. Anstey's humorous versions of several of the plays may be read by those who appreciate Ibsen with a frank

enjoyment proportioned to their appreciation of the great dramatist's power. They know that though shallow critics may, after their kind, fasten on improbabilities and careless eccentricities as if these were the main features of Ibsen's work, the electric hold that he gains upon all who read or see his plays is all the stronger proof of his greatness because of the phenomenal drawbacks which his utter indifference to minor likelihood has encumbered him withal.

Nor is it always minor unlikelihood only by which Ibsen is handicapped. Essential, pervading, substantial improbability is upon occasion braved with a courage as unfaltering or an indifference as profound. Nothing can give dramatic work an air of greater unreality—nothing may be expected so decidedly to alienate the average playgoer—as such a crude mixture of the real and the symbolical as is to be found in “the Master Builder.” You never know how much of it you must take for parable; how much for frenzied hyperbole utterly out of place, according to ordinary canons, in a pre-

sentation of real life; how much—if any—for emblem of some unstated moral condition. Yet I confess that this “Master Builder” obtained over me a mastery which seemed to be that of exuberant moral power; and I have had testimony from persons wholly devoid of literary, much less of Ibsen predilection, that in seeing the piece wholly without preparation or anticipation they have been grasped as in a vice. One man said to me, as I have stated publicly before—“I felt while seeing ‘the Master Builder’ as if every mean thing or thought I had ever been guilty of was being bitterly summoned to my memory.”

Now this is no praise of a play in the estimation of such a critic as now sits in the seat of the great John Oxenford of the *Times*. An amusing piece of well-managed nonsense was lately produced in London, and the leading journal congratulated the management not only on having produced an entertaining farcical comedy, but on having restored the stage to its proper function. I don’t know how far I shall carry this audience with me, but I am of opinion

that frivolous amusement has of late made most undesirable encroachments, not only on the stage, but in many other departments.

There is no probability of plays of the Ibsen type becoming too numerous. Few can write them; few care to see them; it must be admitted that their subjects are morbid, and that if they pretended to "see life whole" their point of view would be pessimistic. But the morbid element in life is far-reaching; is productive in life of the most dramatic events; enters consciously or unconsciously into much human experience; is subtly connected in all but those whose sanity is least sensitive with many of our keenest and most prevalent feelings; is liable greatly to affect us in the dearest and closest relations; is amenable very considerably to the will when properly understood; and is therefore well worthy of being to a certain extent studied, whether as a mere field of intelligent investigation or as a stimulus and corrective of the moral consciousness.

Upon many the result of reading or seeing Ibsen is the arousal of conscience by the con-

templation of morbid mental anatomy. And morbid mental anatomy, as he with a strange fascination displays it, is related in turn to various obligations of mind and body, of domestic, social, civic, patriotic and spiritual bearings, all of vast importance to individual and social life.

I am not prepared to discuss whether it is permissible for Art to use morbid anatomy or physiology thus. I move the previous question: If the art is great, should it be challenged? For my part I demur to canons, whether reasoned or arbitrary, which would reject or exclude any great product of imagination or insight.

The Master Builder is an architect—provincial and middle class, as Ibsen's characters usually are—who is engaged in the building business. For reasons of the drama the author has combined with Halvard Solness's remarkable ambition and success in his calling a mystical aim, which has at length taken form in certain designs for the creation of perfect homes and a project for the erection of a gigantic tower. The confident and careless manipulation

of this curious compost of reality and transcendental, heady intention is among the most childish work—probably the most childish—that Ibsen has ever done; but it is associated with and is the mere frame and canvas for a rare picture of selfish irresponsibility. This worthy, common-place, provincial architect Solness, becomes the type of a character abundant enough, it is to be feared; one wholly given up to the interests and the fancies of self, and a prey to any delusion or deluder that can intoxicate his personality; but possessing also a remarkable appropriating fascination over others. He comes under the power of others and exercises power over others—in this particular being much more real than the autocratic and melodramatic personages, such as George Eliot's Grandcourt, who usually rule the roast in fiction. The rise and progress of a junior architect depraves by jealousy and dishonest self-preservation Solness's mind which once was noble and generous. His neglect and hoodwinking of a good wife reveals the callousness which egotism has grown in him. His duplicity and

sensuousness in dealing with a young female relative who is his clerk, are all the baser because he accommodates them to his interests and subordinates them to the wild and wayward influence gained over him by the eccentric heroine of the play. This is a young woman named Hilda Wangel, previously known to students of the plays, having been seen as quite a girl in "The Lady from the Sea." There she exhibited a precocious appetite for what is "thrilling" and got into her head a fancy which becomes the catchword of the later play. In "the Master Builder" it becomes evident that this fancy has grown with her growth and strengthened with her strength—which is now in spite of her flightiness considerable. Entering the domestic circle of the Solnesses, fascinating the wife and fascinating the husband, who in a casual way, thinking nothing about it, had fascinated her when she was little more than a child and created in her the fancy key-note of which I have spoken, she at once dominates the interior, though guilty of the absurdest vagaries—perhaps because of them—feeds full and at the same

time piques and titillates the vanity, the enjoying faculty, the vein of unscrupulousness and the wild ambition of the Master Builder, whose moral sanity is entirely gone, and brings about an actual tragic crisis when, climbing to the summit of his Babel-tower, he reels and is precipitated headlong to the earth.

The meaning of all this is surely clear enough to anyone with a grain of imagination. I neither insist on the possibility of the incidents nor attempt to transmute them into allegory. I let myself go with the author, and I think I see pretty well all he wishes me to see, and find it powerful, absorbing, typical of whole regions of human life. I admit that Ibsen might have told the same grim, wayward, moral story in terms of actual life. I allow that a dramatist takes a great risk if he does not restrict himself to things that might happen—not necessarily in his collocation of them, but being possible separate occurrences, permissible for him to combine and to heighten for stage purposes by language and action, and to elucidate by soliloquy. In the modifications of reality which

are thus made for dramatic purposes, the playwright must feel in advance the pulse of his audience, and may extend very indefinitely the limits of the supposed possible. But if he disregards the element of possibility of incident, and hovers between the purely fanciful and the seemingly emblematic, he must face extraordinary difficulties. It is well that Ibsen faced these difficulties, and he has surmounted them. The ethical effect of "the Master Builder" is far greater than would have been the effect of the plot and characters if they had been more prosaically settled and moulded into forms of probable and consistent incident.

And besides this there may become apparent to one in reading this play something of the method in which Ibsen works. My suggestion is that, setting out with an intention to make his play collectively didactic, he leaves to chance and fancy whether he is didactic in passing; that he scorns the idea of concrete probability so long as his moral abstractions and physiological perceivings are true; and that in writing he gets into a condition of exaltation, the work

done in which would be revised out of existence, or into comparative insipidity, by a more timid or fastidious author, but is left by him untouched when once it has passed from his brain to paper.

Self always bulks largely in Ibsen's work—not the dramatist's self—but the selves of his characters. It is as introspective as Carlyle desired that we all should not be. Another instance of this peculiarity is "Peer Gynt," which though a poem is a more vulgar "Master Builder." "Peer Gynt" has I believe been acted both lately and twenty years ago, and Grieg supplied music for a recent representation. Presumably, however, it was not written for the stage. It sets out from an atmosphere of Scandinavian folk-lore; and returns at its close pretty nearly to the same surroundings. I have no knowledge of the original to enable me to judge of the composition as a poem, but my instinct is that the translation by the Messrs. Archer gives a fair idea of it. Another of my disqualifications is—if I may trouble you with my personal equation—that I am constitutionally incapable

of greatly enjoying folk-lore for its own sake or when it yields succulence only from a husk of crude narrative, which may or may not be symbolical. Ibsen is said to have obtained the local colour of "Peer Gynt" and "Brand" when commissioned by the Norwegian Government to collect songs and legends at Romsdal and Söndmöre. The results are not attractive to me. But the translators suggest that "the sheer interest, the pure poetry of the thing," should carry the reader past all obscurities, and that the poem should "bite upon his mind." Its right to be accounted as "upon the summits of literature" consists, they say, in its "meaning so much more than the poet consciously intended." "One of the characteristics of a masterpiece," they add, is "that every one can read into it his own secret." This privilege of the masterpiece has certainly been pushed to an extreme in "Peer Gynt," but I admit that the work does carry even an unsympathetic reader along, and that the secret I read into it—if I read any secret into it—is the fatuity and criminality of self-delusion when it takes the

form of opiniative, unscrupulous self-indulgence. Peer Gynt, though he begins as the companion of trolls, and involves himself half in truth, half in brag, with all sorts of weird Norwegian legendry, careers through the world in the subsequent tableaux of his life with the manners of a bagman and the morals of a charlatan, making money by commercial immoralities, accepting any other immoralities that turn up for his delectation, evading the truth about himself with consummate Philistine audacity, committing the most base cruelties without a suspicion of remorse for absolutely selfish reasons, but all the time imagining that he is in some special degree a favourite of Heaven, and that there will be something very wrong if at last he is not as fortunate with the Judge of all the Earth as he has been in all the wild transactions of his life. His catchword is that a man should be himself. Throughout the action this is a mere synonym for indulging himself. The scenes—unlinked by consecutive story—where they have apparent meaning are a study of ill-educated, undisciplined, optimist

egotism. So understood, the crude drama hits hard at foibles that lie deep in many characters, as well as floating on the surface, but one can scarcely help feeling that the effect would have been greater if the work had been more coherent. There is a half comic, half sensuous episode in which Peer Gynt, in the most flagrant disguise of transparent imposture figures as an Oriental prophet, and attaches to himself, or attaches himself to, a sly desert maiden, who eventually runs off with his valuables and leaves him stranded in a Sahara. There is a serious episode in which a priest delivers a very original funeral sermon on a man who as a boy chopped a finger off in order to escape conscription :—

No patriot was he. Both for Church and State
A fruitless tree. But there on the upland ridge,
In the small circle where he saw his calling,
There he was great because he was himself.
His inborn note rang true unto the end.
His days were as a lute with muted strings.
And, therefore, peace be with thee, silent warrior,
That fought the peasant's little fight, and fell.
It is not ours to search the heart and reins,
That is no task for dust but for its ruler.
Yet dare I freely, firmly speak my hope,
He scarce stands crippled now before his God.

But this passage is every way far above almost everything else in "Peer Gynt."

There is much talk of the vigour and earnestness that go to a sin. There is much discussion and illustration—all whimsical—of what it is to be yourself, a topic full in its essence, in Peer Gynt's opinion, of edification. There are absolutely inane colloquies designed to bring out Peer Gynt's self-sufficient, empty character, but sinking for the purpose to a very poor literary level. There is a coarse and frolicsome comparison of a philosopher to a tom-cat. There is a really striking and Carlylean *simile* of an onion—all swathings and no centre—as an illustration of how the central core of some human character eludes the search—ending with the sardonic comment "Nature is witty." After a series of ill-conducted repetitions of a feeble spiritual conundrum, in the solution of which Peer Gynt is to find a respite from death, the end comes in a piece of curiously meaningless sentiment, a woman to whom he has never been properly attached revealing to him that he has always been "himself, the whole man, the true

man" "in her faith, in her hope and in her love." Obviously this is no answer to any question that Peer Gynt's *bizarre* career may have raised. But the production is in no sense one to be dealt with seriously as a concatenation or as a whole. It has interesting and even telling moments. It has humour though very clumsy humour. It is strongly saved from the aimlessness of mere whim by the uncompromising presentation in many phases of an unscrupulous vulgarian with a feeble turn for self introspection. But there is no real problem, no real answer, no real theorem, no real thesis, no refined excellence. I cannot allow that "Peer Gynt" is on the summits of literature at all.

"Brand"—Ibsen's other dramatic poem—is a very different matter. This is serious, without any attempt at humour. The metre I am told, and can well believe, is noble. The diction is eloquent. The action is impressive. Here we are among ideals and all other ideals bow down before one which is supreme—the ideal of self-surrender, for which the motto or catchword is "All or nothing." We have no reason

to conclude that this is the poet's personal ideal in ethics or religion. At all events I hold it to be an indefensible one. There is no virtue in self-renunciation *per se*. Martyrdom must sometimes be obligatory, but there is no reason why martyrs should be life-long anchorites or self-torturers. The martyr-spirit when called forth by exigencies of duty is sublime in itself. But it is a matter of course to the true martyr. If martyrdom were cultivated for its own sake, or even as the one essential thing to be sought for the good of others it would become a mere morbid will-worship. A constant insistence upon self-surrender as essential to please God is, however, an ideal capable of creating a great story—if not a great drama. Ibsen has so treated it that whether renunciation is a good ideal or not its exemplar Brand is an immortal creation. Sombre, stern, forbidding, unsympathetic; but true with a cruel truth to the rigid and frigid doctrine to which his whole being is pledged. The subject is pursued with most pathetic details.

In much that is called pessimism in Ibsen

he does well to be angry. His feeling is indignation at the unsatisfactoriness of human motives and conduct. The average "whole-some" playwright—as he is called—concentrates the villainy or the unsatisfactoriness in one or two characters, and flatters humanity in the others by exhibiting a number of personages well-meaning and on the whole not repugnant. This method rises in the greatest poets and creators into very high regions of excellence. It is the way of Shakspeare, of Cervantes, of Goethe, of Scott, of Dickens, of George Eliot, of Bulwer, and of Charles Reade. It is not the way of Ibsen. He is for laying bare and abrading the weakness and errors of all, and administers scarifying treatment to foibles as well as to vices.

I have said how largely self is examined and probed in his works. Here is a searching and scathing passage from "Brand" in which what I may call the selfishness of many ordinary people, grimly and awkwardly caricatured in "Peer Gynt," is solemnly chidden :

Joy makes flaw in no breast. Grant that you *are* a

slave to mirth, only be one from one day's end to another. Do not be one thing one day or one year, and something else the next. Whatever you are be that wholly and entirely, and not by bits, piecemeal. The Bacchant is a distinct idea; a toper its failure. Silenus is a picturesque figure; a drunkard his caricature. Only go about this country and observe each man, and you will see that everyone has learnt to be a little of everything. He retains a little veil of seriousness for Sunday use, a little adherence to the customs of his fathers, a little pruriency after supper—for *that* was the same with his fathers—a little warm-heartedness when there is merry-making, and he hears songs about the little 'rock-fast rock-folk' who have never borne stick or bludgeon, a little lavish as far as promises go, and a little hair-splitting when he soberly discusses the promise he gave at a feast for fulfilment on the day of crisis. But all, as I say, only quite a little; his failure, his superiority do not go far; he is a fraction in great and in small, a fraction in evil and a fraction in good; but the worst of it is every factor of the fraction utterly vitiates all the rest.

This reveals only one of the least important of the poet's many ideals. But it is significant of the desire he always has that men should "see to the nethermost depth of each of their deeds." His ideals are not new—that cannot be expected; but they are trumpet-toned expressions of good old ideals—and that is what frail

beings in search of moral strength and rightness do well to desire. Nor is anything to the contrary expressed when you have said "Hackneyed," "Fanciful," "Priggish," "Exaggerated." There is a happy percussive impact of the minor Brand ideals on the reader's mind which shows that they are not hackneyed. "Fanciful" merely means unfamiliar, and the objection should be got over by meditation. "Priggish" is a mere protest of frivolous irresponsibility. Exaggeration—unconscious in a great poet—is, within the limits of artistic judgment, a great weapon which imagination places in his hands for moral purposes. God knows we need ideals to raise us into higher tones of life; and these negatively or positively, in the spiritual, in the domestic, in every life-region Ibsen gives us. That scourging may be better than quietude—that national necessity should breed heroism, or a people is not worthy of redemption—the real need of the man who cannot live and dare not die—the value of knowing your work—the noble love-thought that so far from love weakening the sense of duty, there should come "a

world-wide sea, with scourge of gale and rush of currents" between any two lovers, if one makes of love an excuse for ignobly shirking supreme obligations of life—that faith is likely enough to be of good quality in proportion as it is unconventional—that true sight is "light and wings" to a man—that the image of God which we have stained may rise again in us "washed by the will"—the doubtful and needing to be qualified, yet important ideal that "we should live the life we know we can"—that, on the other hand, stress and strain are invaluable—that God's love is neither weak nor mild, and that (very daringly said) He was not humane to His Son Jesus Christ—that a road is still needed between life and religion, those at present existing being mere "confusion of everything between a dark lantern and northern lights:"—these are all conceptions such as a great poet earns gratitude by presenting to our sympathies and thoughts.

But I have distinguished between the subsidiary ideals and the paramount ideal of this poem-play. Where the author becomes most powerful over our sense of awe—where he fills

us with gloom—where he harrows us, as in the scene in which the pastor's wife is compelled in mere self-mortification to surrender every single garment and toy associated with her dead child, on the stern principle "all or nothing"—the ground of sanity has been departed from; the story is the tragedy of a possessed fanatic. The good purpose in Brand's life is strangled by his pre-occupation with self-surrender. His reason is vitiated by a gloomy absorption in self-denial as an aim good in itself. Heightened by restrained and classic word painting in every noble scenic possibility germane to the theme—deepened by every expedient of heart-rending experience—adorned in the character of Agnes with one of the sweetest and noblest figures in poetry—disfigured only by certain poor polemical parodies of "Humanitarianism," which seem to refer to old provincial controversies—"Brand" is undoubtedly one of the greatest works of ethical imagination that the world has ever seen. It contains in the following sentence—wholly away from the spirit of the book—one of the loveliest things ever said

by a husband to his wife. It is of their child that Brand is speaking to Agnes:—"Go and watch him while he sleeps. Sing him into bright dreams. A child's soul is as clear and and placid as a tarn in the summer sunshine. A mother can hover over it like a bird, which, on its silent flight, mirrors her beauty in its deepest depths."

We have said nothing as yet of that exaction of intellectual affinity in conjugal life which seems to be a fair inference from some of the most interesting of Ibsen's prose plays, and which as he treats it is almost as unrealisable an ideal as his "All or nothing" in the relations between man and God. It is in this, rather than in the great religious drama of which I have just spoken,—in this, and in his firm and penal exposure of the hereditary consequences, physiological and moral, of ill-governed life—that he has gained or almost gained the character of a prophet. Here again we come upon a theme of vast extent—and this time it is a theme which cannot be systematically discussed. If we may judge by the literature of

many countries there are a great many uncomprehended wives in the world, who are apt, in the language of the old Methodist hymn, to fill their fellow creatures' ears with the sad tales of all their woes ; and there may be some uncomprehended husbands, though they are less vocal and communicative. The husband supposes himself to be uncomprehended in Ibsen's play of "*Rosmersholm*," assisted by the very much emancipated endeavours of Miss West. The wife knows herself to be uncomprehended in "*A Doll's House*." The whole subject is sublimated into a condition of hyper-ethereality in "*A Lady from the Sea*." No one can deny that though such connubial failures have their ridiculous and fussy side they are a serious factor of human misery. It is misery of a peculiarly acute and wearing kind. It falls mainly on persons especially unable to bear mental pain. It diminishes not only the happiness of homes but their utility in the scheme of human life. Apart from all this, though the study may be a morbid one, there is no aspect of the great everlasting problem of He and She which sup-

plies more interesting matters of contemplation. In objection to such illustrations in a dramatic form it may be demurred that to exacerbate the idea of deficient affinity in married life will tend to induce people who are unequally yoked to make the worst of their situation instead of the best. And if we are to judge Ibsen moralistically it must be confessed that the duty of making the best of marriage, which must stand very high in any practical Christian code, under the existing theory of the marriage connexion, appears never to enter his mind. Indeed, he never teaches duty at all in the matter. His characters follow their own sweet or unsweet wills with little restraint even from circumstances. The extremely interesting developments of the subject which he achieves are sufficiently absorbing to justify the dramatist as an artist. If he is a witness to fact the result of his testimony is that those who submit to the want of affinity at home and those who seek for affinity abroad are about equally miserable.

Some will see in these statements sufficient ground for condemning Ibsen's plays of this

class. But I adhere to my principle that where work is great you ought not to ostracise it, and indeed cannot. A dramatist is no more bound to satisfy you and me with the moralistic tendencies of his plays than is a poet to satisfy you and me with his ideals. Are these marriage plays important—able—do they reveal striking aspects of life—have they in them the quality to become classic—are the scenes they depict such as will be remembered?

But this is putting the defence of Ibsen very low. The net result of his marriage plays is a demand for more real, more refined, more soul-satisfying compatibility between husbands and wives. It is a large subject, and one not convenient or even ripe for public discussion. This, however, may be positively said: anything that tends to a discreet choice, apart from mere undefinable liking or fancy, will improve the average of marriages. Much at the last must depend on chance, but chance should be eliminated as far as possible. Both sexes have been much to blame, and even where there has been much mutual accommodation after marriage, it

has often been not quite in the best spirit, or with adequate tact, or with anything like the resource that is found in dealing with other exigencies of life. The need of a better and more intellectual companionship—no new lesson, for it has been as continuously taught as, in the choice of partners, it has been frequently disregarded—is one that needed to be taught in a new way, so as to make the possibilities, as well as the impossibilities of marriage, a living theme of thought and speech. It has certainly in Ibsen's hands gravely affected European, and especially British opinion. Alike in the beginning and in the continuance—let us hope very seldom in the ending—of the marriage relationship, much of this part of Ibsen's work is instructive as well as vivid. The best thing we can hope is that it will instruct the right people in the right way. May I say thus publicly—that I have heard things of young couples since Ibsen became known to us which encouraged me to believe that they had found in his gloomy exhibition of incompatibilities and wayward affinities an unexpected gospel? They found it

in their enjoyment by contrast of a conscious and elaborated companionship and co-operation which they had not observed among many of their friends, and which, except in the love-instincts of courtship—too often illusory—they had not really anticipated.

Nor may we leave out of sight that for good or for evil—I believe, with all drawbacks, for good—Ibsen has set a fashion which has made our own stage illustrate for the first time with any seriousness the doctrine of pre-nuptial morality on the part of men; a doctrine which, in one way and another, has been discredited or at least held in abeyance by Society; a doctrine which is even now by many regarded as a pious opinion or a counsel of perfection; a doctrine for which we are now at the fulness of time; a doctrine which is necessary to rectify the balance of our morality and the balance of justice between the sexes. Anything that can purify the young male life will work a most salutary revolution in Society.

I hope I do not seem to be pressing this matter unduly. I am painfully sensible of the

difficulty of pressing it at all. Good people cannot believe what evil exists. Worldly people will not believe that the evil can in any appreciable degree be got rid of. But it is worthy of consideration how wonderfully the manners and opinions of Society have improved since the last century; and within the next half century there will, I believe, be a greatly accelerated improvement. It looks as little likely now as the improvement we have realised looked in the days of Lord Byron. But it will come; and it will be much facilitated by the effect of that culture of women which is here so greatly promoted.

I can only hint at the immensely important fact that this subject has—and must have—bearings on health and heredity which Ibsen has not shrunk from exploiting. He has been charged with obscenity. There is one puzzling instance which it is difficult to explain away. But I do not class as obscene deliberate and brave tackling with high moralistic purpose of subjects which, though generally tabooed by delicacy, may occasionally be dealt with courage-

ously by a great master of human life upon his responsibility—than which none can be more serious than that which had fallen upon Ibsen as a greater teacher of men by the time he wrote the solemn play called “Ghosts.”

Returning for a moment to the plays in which he has dealt with the more refined aspects of affinity or non-affinity in married life, I must forego the attempt to trace in this place the meaning of so subtle a drama as “A Lady from the Sea.” The public have this week had an opportunity of seeing “Rosmersholm” played with skill and power. Deformed as it is by being brought down to the scale of parochial pettinesses, and rendered “queer”—there is no other word for it—by the strange use as chorus of one of Ibsen’s odd literary wastrels—it is none the less a tragedy of extraordinary and grasping power. Indeed it is a double tragedy. A wife supposed not to comprehend her husband has been driven to self-inflicted death before the play begins by a supposed comprehending female friend of the husband, in whom rivalry and a yearning affinity constitute a fanaticism, and who

has intrigued herself enthusiastically into the household. This awful suicide before the rising of the curtain, is in apposition to the double suicide of Rosmersholm and Rebecca West, which at the fall of the curtain is seen from a window and reported by the old servant to the audience, and so ends the piece. The shifting metaphysical business of the action, all the power of which lies with Miss West, falls between these two tragic incidents. The lady is very convincing. If she were vulgar, maladroit, unimpressive, unlikely to win admiration and influence, the necessary probability of the tragedy would be lacking. As it is, the play has to contend, in a cosmopolitan sphere, with deficiencies characteristic of Ibsen's peculiar provincial method. At one time it is polished in its social intercourse and by-play: affording Miss West opportunities such as she might have in a play by Sardou; at another time it is mere antic, or little else, or concerned episodically in dull local controversy. In the antic passages in which Brendel figures we have a curious instance of Ibsen's dependence for chorus on eccentric

men of Bohemian and dissolute habits. In these characters—scarcely ever brought on our stage—he seems to discern a kind of philosophical inspiration; with the effect upon British audiences that the worser sort laugh and the better sort sustain a moral shiver as at the puzzling presence of something uncanny. In the Bacchic incursions of Ulric Brendel, in the dogmatic formalities of Rector Kroll, and in Rosmersholm's weak conversation with a low-minded local Editor, the stronger interest of the drama runs a risk of being dissipated. But as Rebecca's motive and character are developed, the Ibsen grip grows firmer. During long passages the play becomes as weird and awe-compelling by its mere revelations of an unscrupulous but afflated and intense personality as any drama ever became by the use of supernatural or melodramatic effects. Such is the strange, absorbing action that lies between the single suicide of the destroyed wife and the double suicide of the victims of a crude and unaccomplished affinity. I have never found any tragedy more really tragic. As in "*Macbeth*,"

but more so, we are led to remark sardonically what poor creatures men are that women make such a fuss about; but Rebecca is quite a nineteenth-century boudoir Lady Macbeth.

She is sometimes called an adventuress. The epithet cannot with any nicety be applied to her. She is a dreadful woman of another sort. Unscrupulous as she is, she is sincerely concerned for Rosmersholm as for herself. She desires with a devouring hunger that they should both live their lives and live them together, and that their lives should be one and indivisible, and largely operative. She is quite indifferent who suffers in order that this may be; but it is only under this strong impulse that she behaves as an adventuress would behave for sheer self-interest. All the same, it is doubtless true that if she had not found this excitement she would have craved another.

The superiority which is secured to "Rosmersholm" by its gloomy tragic force is secured to "A Doll's House" by wild and subtle and invincible domestic pathos. Who that has seen, or even read this play, can ever forget the

winsome young wife, loving her husband and loved by him, but miserable perpetually under the knowledge that she and her ways and her life are mere innocent toys to him? In any case a woman of her noble temperament must have suffered from this, but Nora Helmer has in her heart the memory of a great criminal sacrifice that she has made for the husband who considers her a mere pretty twittering lark, occasionally condescending in the majesty of his masculine nature to allow his senses to be dazzled by her beauty and her brightness. She waits for her miracle—the miracle of intelligent gratitude from a nature too hide-bound in its own conceptions to apprehend, still more to appreciate, the heroism she has achieved. Her miracle never—never comes. This play has scarcely any of the crudeness characteristic of the author. It is Ibsen with few of Ibsen's weaknesses. With homely natural art the poor woman is shown swallowing her tears, keeping down her misery, playing with her children, keeping at arm's length the husband's friend who would make love to her. More and more

impossible her life becomes to her. At last she is compelled by circumstances to confess to her husband that years ago she committed forgery to save his life. This is the critical moment; and the miracle comes not. The husband densely fails to appreciate her tremendous sacrifice. He is at first loftily severe, and afterwards smugly forgiving. "There is something," says he, in this latter vein, — "something indescribably sweet and soothing to a man in having forgiven his wife—honestly, from the bottom of his heart." In that moment it bursts upon her that she "has been living in that home these eight years with a strange man, and has borne him three children." When her husband sees nothing but imprudence and dishonour in the great deed of glorious shame which she has committed for his sake, and graciously forgives her for it, talking seriously to her for the first time in their lives the rest is heart-break — but not submission. She will be the little squirrel, the toy-wife, no longer. The wild, whirling dance has prefigured her revolt, though Helmer only saw in it a merry hysteria that

tickled his senses—the spurning of his endearments shudderingly anticipated the end—the sudden leaving home—the heavily-banged street door—the silence of the after separation. Here the thesis of Ibsen's affinity plays is supported by a touching story, and the heroine lives for ever in our affections.

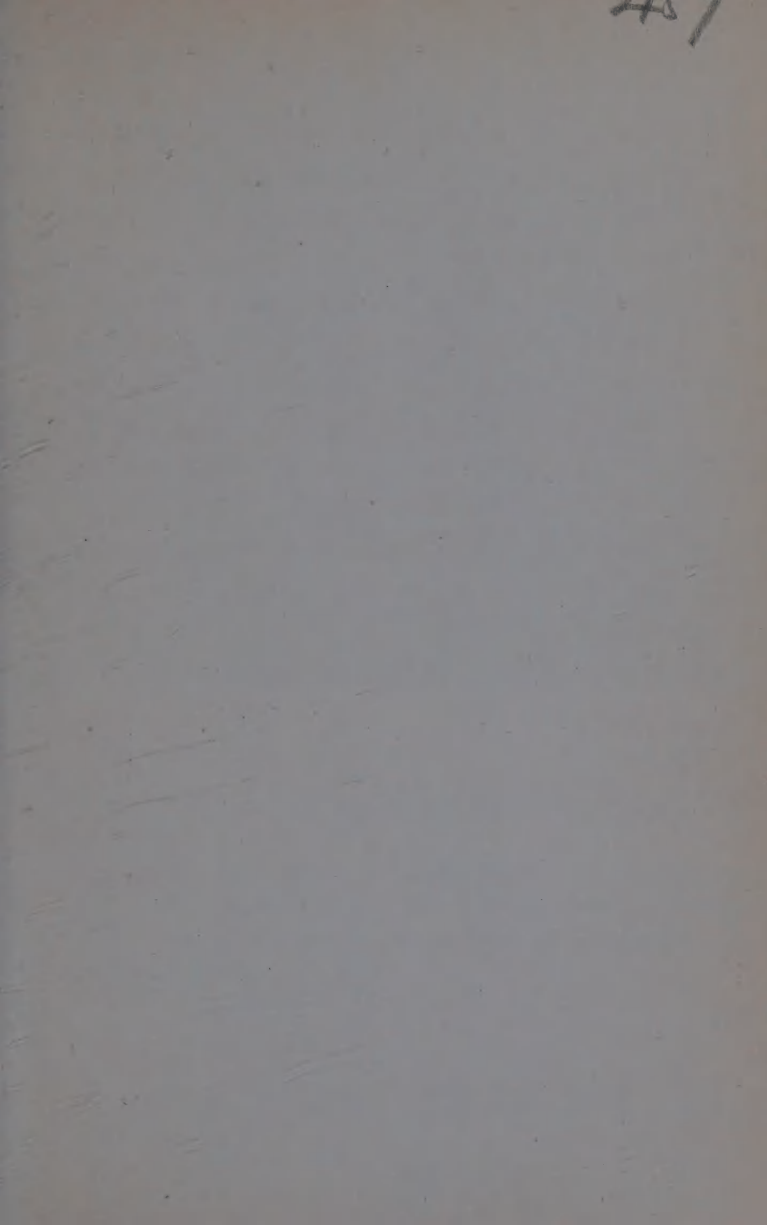
I have said nothing of Ibsen's political plays. All have good general principles, especially of public spirit and of individual upright conduct in public life. All possess grit and grip. All succeed in spite of intense and belittling provinciality. The historical plays are able and have fine passages and striking characters and collocation of characters. In "Emperor and Galilean" there is a strong and very unfavourable embodiment of Julian. The finest female character in all Ibsen I take to be Lona Hessel in "the Pillars of Society," in which play there is enough sound doctrine and example of life and manners to make us all good men and women if we will condescend to be preached to from a provincial text.

And, after all why not? We at least in

Liverpool have some reason to respect provinciality. Are we not proud of the manageable, comprehensible, capable-of-being-stimulated life with which we are here familiar? Is not this great building and all it stands for a monument of provincial public spirit? Do we not value the individuality, the power, the self-respect, the past growth and the makeable history of this great city, in which some of us have been born and to which many of us have been drawn? Do we not say to ourselves and rightly that the opportunities for strong individual public responsibility whether in public or private life are greater here than in a capital? Are we not conscious that to help culture and morals and the doing of good here is more practicable? Are we not aware that if we are doing no good in art, in letters, in science, in philanthropy and in religion here we are neglecting that which lies next, nay under our hands?

This is what Isben has never neglected. Whatever his faults, his shortcomings, he has always striven to give men and women better

ideals, and he has for the most part shown them these within their daily lives and not beyond them. We may wonder as we read his plays what Norway is. There are some who say that he lived away at Munich, and forgot what manner of place his native country was, and misrepresented his fellow countrymen. To us there is the note of human nature, of provincial human nature, of human nature somewhat sublimated by modern culture, but still *naïve* in revelation of itself in all that he has written. And plays that can so be described are plays for us to study.



5 Russell, Edward Richard Russell, baron, 1834-1920.

Ibsen : a lecture delivered at University College, Liverpool, at the request of the Senate, 26th January, 1894 / by Edward Russell. -- Liverpool : Howell, 1894.

54p. ; 18cm.

1. Ibsen, Henrik, 1828-1906--Addresses, essays, lectures.

